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SUBJECT: GEORGIA MEDIA AND PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COVERAGE: THE CASE
OF AJARA

1. (SBU) Summary. As the election campaign heats up, Embassy Tbilisi is reviewing the media coverage of the elections. Although the Autonomous Republic of Ajara remains an opposition stronghold according to polls, Ajara media is indirectly controlled by the National Movement, and seems to be largely working for the re-election of Saakashvili. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Broadcast media is dominated by the state-run channel, Ajara TV, which is overtly controlled by the local authorities through their general manager, Tea Tsetskhladze. The only commercial TV station, Channel 25, is largely self-censoring and may soon be shut down for non-payment of back taxes which the station leadership claims is not owed. The one independent radio station remains off the air for technical reasons. The regional print media is confined to two weekly papers, one of which, Batumelebi, is considered the best source of credible information for the area; the other paper, Batumi, is considered of marginal importance.

3. (SBU) Ajara TV's general director Tsetskhladze is the former press secretary of Levan Varshalomidze, the head of the government in the region (and a National Movement member). She acts to strictly control the coverage of the election campaign on Ajara TV and Radio in favor of the National Movement. Opposition parties complain that they are ignored by Ajara TV, or that stories about them are slanted - thus when the United National Council transferred computers from the Batumi City Council to their office, it was reported as if the UNC was asking for office space in the Council premises. The campaign law stipulates that bona fide candidates be given free advertising and this is being followed, but the opposition feels that Saakashvili's campaign is widely and regularly reported on by Ajara, while their campaigns are not. Meanwhile the only independent channel, Channel 25, which was quite anti-government in the past, and was shut down by the government on November 7, now is largely quiet. While it has no apparent direct obligations or links to the government; however, its journalists and owners practice extreme self-censorship. This seems to be due to avoid being shut down by the authorities over their tax arrears. During this pre-election period the Channel will only air one political and one analytical talk show (funded by Internews) on December 26. Meanwhile Radio Green Wave - which is viewed as a very independent source of news and had broadcast to the entire region - is now off the air due to technical reasons.

4. (SBU) When asked about this situation, the National Movement's campaign manager for Ajara, Kakha Getsadze, said there was little need for media coverage of the election in Ajara. "The voters are well-informed anyway; people have felt the positive changes on their own skin. The presidential campaign has not warmed up yet and, correspondingly, the journalists seem to be less active." When asked if the National Movement headquarters has a press officer Mr. Getsadze responded: "Not important. The journalists can always find us easily."

15. (SBU) Comment. While analysts are focusing on the national media based in Tbilisi, it is clear that media in the regions, particularly the Ajara autonomous region, bears watching. The lack of a fully developed media and self-censorship and economic pressures combine to limit true debate and election coverage in Ajara. End Comment.

TEFFT